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Helsinki University Press
2021-11

Jokela , S & Minoia , P 2021 , Tourism platforms . in R Toivanen & P C Krieg (eds) , Situated Sustainability : A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts . Helsinki University Press , Helsinki , pp. 223-237 . https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-14-16

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/336684
https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-14-16

CHAPTER 16

Tourism Platforms

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Abstract

Over the past decade, Internet-enabled peer-to-peer platforms have had a significant impact on urban life and the economies of many cities. This process is sometimes referred to as 'Airbnbzation', with reference to the most notable platform, Airbnb, which has grown explosively since it was founded in 2008. Airbnb and other peer-to-peer platforms rely on new business models that are designed to extract and use data while intermediating between different groups of people. These platforms have been conceptualized both as forms of a sustainable, decentralized sharing economy and as manifestations of platform capitalism that disrupts the existing structures of market economies. We draw on the cases of

How to cite this book chapter:
Jokela, S. and P. Minoia. 2021. 'Tourism Platforms'. In *Situating Sustainability: A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts*, edited by C. P. Krieg and R. Toivanen, 223–237. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-14-16.

Venice and Helsinki to illustrate the sustainability discourses and geographically uneven consequences of Airbnb and other peer-to-peer platforms. Venice is an example of a city where tourism has reached unsustainable levels, whereas Helsinki is an example of a city where the growth of Airbnb has been more modest. These two cities thus illustrate the contradictory discourses on economic and social sustainability surrounding peer-to-peer platforms.

Introduction: Situated Sustainability in Tourism

Many tourism institutions and policy-makers have recently embraced 'sustainability' in their attempts to define the role of tourism in development. Discussions and research on 'sustainable tourism' have proliferated in the international agenda, starting from Agenda 21 issued at the UN Rio Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, up to the recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched in 2015 (UNWTO 2010; United Nations 2015). Tourism can contribute to achieving these goals, including decent work and economic growth (SDG8); reduced inequalities (SDG10), as well as peace and justice (SDG16).

More and more, the tourism sustainability discourse has included complex analysis of destinations, infrastructures and services, and social corporate sustainability tools to control potential impacts from a managerial perspective (Funt and Lynes 2018). Despite these considerations, many researchers have criticized the prevailing understanding of 'sustainable tourism' for being connected to a growth-oriented neoliberal policy framework (Mowforth and Munt 2015) where the public sector has only a minor role. Sustainability in tourism is still conceptualized largely in terms of economic and financial growth, whereas social and environmental sustainability have remained subordinate to the economic dimension. For example, in many destinations, ecotourism is promoted as a way of integrating local livelihoods into transnational flows of capital, goods, and culture. However, tourism economy, especially when carried out by large investors active in multiple destinations, may threaten local traditional ones. Also, fostering economic growth does not guarantee that the surplus, employment,

benefits and adverse effects generated through tourism are distributed evenly (Hall and Richards 2000).

In this chapter, we propose a situated understanding of sustainability, acknowledging that while the sustainability issues related to tourism are 'global' in nature, their manifestations are contingent on the local cultural, soci(et)al, and regulatory context.

Situating sustainability allows us to reach a critical view on tourism, going beyond the assumption that there are simple and universal fixes to negative impacts. Situated thinking involves a reflection on practices, through which the locale is transformed as a consequence of structural changes enacted by all parties engaged in the tourism industries. As Haraway (1988) proposes, situated knowledge demands subjective positioning inside the issues, rather than external hegemonic visions. Situatedness is not sufficiently considered in tourism, although this area of study and operations is deeply intertwined with local planning, democracy, and governance. By proposing to link tourism to situated sustainability, we aim at deeper consideration of ethical and political implications of the tourism industry on places. Tourism may help to revive and resurrect cultures and sustain livelihoods for some groups, but may also cause pressures to socio-ecological systems and built heritage, infrastructures, and cultures. Tourism brings external flows of people, capital, consumption—and narrations—into local areas through commercial intermediators that are most often outsiders. This brings along problematic effects as they prioritize tourists and capitalist interests over local residential needs.

Our position in this chapter on urban tourism is situated alongside the residents of our cities of origin: Venice and Helsinki. The two cities represent very different situations of urban tourism: Venice is a mature destination, often seen as 'the bad example' of unsustainable tourism worldwide, while Helsinki has a recent involvement in global tourism networks. However, they are both interested in Internet-based platforms offering tourism services. Our proposed perspective looks at the platforms' contribution to changing urban areas as places experienced by both residents and tourists. While it is usually argued that global tourism and Internet platforms bring homogenizing pressures, our situated approach

brings recognition of epistemological and ontological diversities within places, and support for the maintenance of diverse identities, values, and functions. This diversity of visions allows points of conflicts to emerge; for instance, between the tourists' use of public transportation during peak times of work and residents' commuting; or between tourist appeal for community festivals or costumes, and the local needs to preserve local traditions and defend them from industrial appropriation. Residents' situatedness may highlight impacts to the extent that they perceive tourism as a heavy extractive industry taking over long-term practices and sometimes reacting through social mobilization to restore sustainability, cultural appropriateness, and spatial justice.

However, local agency becomes complicated in the current times marked by social media. The possibility—for both tourism operators and consumers—to operate in virtual spaces for promoting, selling, and buying products challenges traditional forms of tourism management and spatial governance. For these reasons, we think that Internet-based tourism activities offer an interesting field of observation of structural changes that happen in our societies nowadays. They also offer a space for the formation of new constituencies and community agency. Such activities do not only operate virtually but they also produce changes that are concretely impacting physical infrastructures, livelihoods, social and economic relations, environments, cultures, and the rights to the city.

Genealogy of Platform Tourism

The rise of Internet-based activities in tourism, through various commercial websites, mobile applications, and social media, is tied to the emergence of platform capitalism, which relies on data as the basis of productivity and economic growth (Olma 2014; Srnicek 2017). According to Srnicek (2017), digital platforms have become a means by which the capitalist system is adapting to the declining profitability of the manufacturing industries. Airbnb, Booking.com and Uber are examples of digital platforms operating in the tourism sector. Their business model focuses on accumulating capital by extracting, analyzing, and controlling data, while

outsourcing everything else, including workers, maintenance and training (Srnicek 2017: 33–35). Their interconnection with other platforms, e.g. Google Maps, enhances the perception of proximity and accessibility of various services and, thus, contributes to making areas more appealing to potential guests.

The rise of these platforms has generated controversial discourses. On the one hand, they have been conceptualized as a form of sharing economy that generates additional income for local residents, decentralizes tourism within cities and promotes sustainability by enabling the sharing of underutilized resources (Martin 2016). On the other hand, digital platforms are criticized for challenging the existing regulatory environment, disrupting structures of market economies and fostering overtourism by accommodating the growing tourism demand (Garcia-López et al. 2019; Martin 2016; Srnicek 2017). Many researches have observed the platforms' profound effects on cities and neighbourhoods: transforming cities into neoliberal spaces of entrepreneurial activity, while fostering commodification of people, housing, and residential neighbourhoods (Minoia and Jokela 2021). For example, Airbnb has shifted from the sole facilitation of peer-to-peer home-sharing toward a diversified offer including apartments and houses, tourist guiding, and other services. Studies have shown that while Airbnb encourages interaction in accordance with the principles of 'sharing economy', the interaction between hosts and guests is limited and more focused on the house rental than the human relationship (Ert and Fleischer 2019: 286; Jung et al. 2016).

While the undesired effects of platform-driven tourism have been acknowledged in many cities, effective governance structures are not in place. These would be needed, especially in areas that suffer from 'overtourism', the overcrowding of destinations or popular tourism sites within them (Dodds and Butler 2019). Platform-based short rentals contribute to overtourism by allowing tourists to access private homes, staying in historical, old neighbourhoods where hotels would not be established. In addition, many studies have reported a connection between gentrification and proliferation of Airbnb listings (e.g. Gutierrez et al. 2017; Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). This is because short-term rentals

have a direct effect on the cost of housing and living, while progressively expanding at the expense of low- and middle-income long-term residents. In the most valued areas, housing speculations are already causing displacement of residents and loss of traditional economies. Other changes involve retail shops and services to accommodate the tourists; decorations and interior designs to please expectations of authenticity and comfort.

As digital platforms impose their own rules to the market, they introduce new organizational forms and new modes of exploitation. For example, the outsourcing of labour has meant that work is done on an on-demand basis by workers who are legally contractors rather than employees, and who may, therefore, be responsible for safety issues and be vulnerable in the face of changes in the digital platforms (Acevedo 2016; Dolnicar 2019: 256–57, 260). The vulnerability of workers is further reinforced by monopoly tendencies of digital platforms based on the platforms' access to vast masses of data. Hosts or superhosts—the most successful ones—constitute a differentiated category of workers (Roelofsen 2018): originally depicted as residents disposing of under-utilized parts of their homes, this group has changed into hosts offering entire apartments with increased professionalism, sometimes presenting online with a rich pool of apartments to rent.

As the following examples show, the organizing principles of tourism are intertwined with wider economic and societal changes, which have to be taken into account when sustainability is examined from the perspective of tourism. It is important to focus on the ways in which global trends manifest themselves in local contexts, paying attention to the scale of neighbourhoods and individuals.

Case Studies

Venice

The case of Venice represents a space of overtourism, and what 'a worst-case scenario' would be for other tourist cities. Already for decades, the tourism monoculture has substituted traditional

livelihoods and cultural activities that had formed the very essence of life on the lagoon city for centuries (Minoia 2017). With the decline of the petrochemical industrial pole of Porto Marghera and other productive sectors like fisheries and handcrafts, the tourism industry, combined with the growing port, has become a major labour provider. It is offering many precarious and exploitative jobs and adding pressures over residential services and commerce, prioritizing those devoted to short-term visitors (Salerno and Russo 2020). In this situation of economic insecurity and social disgregation, the ownership of apartments has been seen as a safe-haven asset, and Airbnb as an intermediary of lodging for tourists has enforced the idea of housing as a source of revenue, rather than the main asset for residential rights (Russo and Richards 2016). Massive advertisement of Internet-based rental intermediators has been spread in many forms (phone calls, letters to private residents, banners in public transport boats, etc.).

Many observers argue that Airbnb and other platforms accelerate the transformation of residential apartments into tourism lodging. Inside Airbnb (2020) shows that, for instance, in August 2019, there were twelve listings for every 100 residents in the historic city. The same analysts have also assessed a strong presence of multiple listings in the hands of a few large operators. Data observation also shows that, given the physical limitation of the historical city, the area of Airbnbzation is expanding to the mainland of Mestre and beyond.

The inhabitants of the historical city are declining at a pattern of about 1000 individuals per year and, in July of 2021, the number of inhabitants totalled just below 50,000 persons. It is argued by many that the increase of platform-based short-term rentals has been one of the main causes for residents' evictions. However, this correlation is contested by some tourist professional categories and even by the local administrators who have claimed that the decline is due to natural causes such as the concentration of aged residents in Venice compared to the inland communal area. In reality, the current spreading of tourist apartments in the mainland shows that the Airbnbzation of the city is mainly caused by the higher rentability of short-term rentals compared to long-term

ones. Many residents' associations strive for a defence of housing rights, but their requests for public intervention to control tourist extractive exploitation remain unanswered, with the sector totally in the hands of strong entrepreneurial lobbies.

Airbnb has also evolved from the intermediation of rental services to the inclusion of other tourism services, e.g. promoting guided tours for allegedly authentic experiences in Venice, for 'living', 'cooking' or 'shopping' 'like a Venetian', despite the fact that the service providers are often new residents with little connection to the city.

Besides Airbnb, many other platforms guide tourists in their activities, like in any other tourist destination. One online platform that has changed the spatiality of walking in Venice is Google Maps. Its importance in navigating and orientation is paramount. As a consequence, the space of the visits has expanded. Through Google Maps and other mobile softwares, everybody is able to explore narrower streets and take shorter ways; but this, unfortunately, contributes to a daily congestion that is perceived by the residents as a further attack into their intimate life.

Helsinki

Helsinki has recently become an integral part of international tourism networks. The total number of overnight stays increased from 3.2 to 4.2 million between 2010 and 2018, resulting in an over 30 percent increase (Visitory 2019). This development manifests itself in the urban scene as proliferation of hotel projects and congestion around major tourist sites during the peak season.

The growth of tourism has been entangled with wider soci(et)al transformations driven by state investments in knowledge-based industries following the economic depression of the 1990s (Schienstock 2007). In this process, Helsinki has acquired a special role as a hub through which Finland has connected itself to global flows of capital, knowledge, and labour, and portrayed itself as a trailblazer in smart solutions and business opportunities enabled by digital data.

As part of this development, the state is currently fostering the digitalization of the tourism sector in order to enhance competition and enable the entrance of new actors to the global tourism market. The digitalization of tourism is connected to urban policies that emphasize the importance of local entrepreneurial spirit as a driver of desired urban development. Dating back to the 'creative city thinking' of the early 2000s (Borén and Young 2013), the City of Helsinki has reinforced the economization of culture for the purpose of generating profit and attracting a talented workforce, companies, and affluent tourists. Recent city branding endeavours have portrayed the city itself as a 'platform' that fosters the economic vitality of the city by enabling rather than regulating entrepreneurial activities (Jokela 2020).

In this context, digital platforms in tourism appear as enablers of ideal forms of active, responsibilized citizenship. This idea has been fostered through the recent deregulation of taxi services by the Act on Transport Services (2018), which has opened incumbent actors up to competition from new entrants. One of these is Uber, which has recently re-established its operations in Helsinki. Similarly, short-term rentals provided by Airbnb and other digital platforms have proliferated in the city, giving rise to new types of micro-entrepreneurs. In 2018, there was one Airbnb listing per 124 inhabitants (compared to one per 178 inhabitants in 2016). This development has been supported by urban policies and marketing campaigns that highlight the importance of 'authenticity' and 'local way of life' as Helsinki's key assets in the field of tourism (e.g. My Helsinki 2019).

For some public authorities, Airbnb appears as a solution for demand fluctuations, as it has enabled the growth of tourism during the high season. In the spirit of the 'authenticity' discourse, some commentators have also praised Airbnb for directing tourists to areas that are less populated by tourism, enabling them to 'live like locals' in spaces that would otherwise be underutilized. However, a closer analysis of Helsinki's Airbnb listings challenges the idea that short-term rentals are primarily a form of sharing economy or a source of extra income for non-professional local

residents. For example, based on data collected by AirDNA (2019),[1] in 2018 a vast majority (81 percent) of Helsinki's Airbnb listings were entire homes that were not shared with the locals (Jokela and Minoia 2020). Furthermore, over one-third of the listings were available or reserved for more than 182 days in a year, indicating that a big proportion of the listings are not permanently inhabited by their hosts. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that more than one-quarter of Helsinki's Airbnb hosts had at least two listings in Finland.

Helsinki's Airbnb listings—and especially the professional rental services—are concentrated in neighbourhoods adjacent to the city centre. In these areas, residents have reported some problems related to short-term rentals, such as disturbances and responsibility issues (City of Helsinki 2020; Pajuriutta 2019). However, there have not been any large-scale movements against Airbnb or other digital platforms in tourism.

While the City of Helsinki is committed to market-oriented tourism policies, the growing popularity of Helsinki as a tourism destination is also generating discussion on the need of steering the growth into a sustainable track. Local authorities acknowledge that the rapid increase in the accommodation supply encourages further growth of tourism-related traffic, posing a challenge to the liveability of the city. According to a hegemonic view supported by Helsinki's status as the European Capital of Smart Tourism in 2019, digitalization of tourism can be reconciled with the principles of sustainable urban development. While the common understanding has been that problems related to short-term rental platforms are small scale and local, the City of Helsinki (2020) has recently issued instructions for providing accommodation in a flat. These instructions create potential for stricter regulation by clarifying the definition of acceptable short-term renting of a flat.

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[1] This data was acquired for the study in 2019 with funding from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Helsinki.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the cases of Venice and Helsinki. Both cities have suffered from a declining role of manufacturing industries that previously constituted their economic backbone, and have ruling administrations considering tourism and large international events as offering growing international reputation and connectivity to the world. This shows that, in both cities, the promotion of tourism is entangled with wider developments, such as knowledge-based economization and commodification of culture. Helsinki's city authority shows a clearer positive interest in service platforms in line with the 'smart city' branding, while Venice's managerial and political space has been invaded by large international events and corporations' interests. In both settings, platforms have accelerated the availability of tourist rentals of apartments. While in Venice, Airbnb is criticized by residents for having subtracted a massive number of residential housing, in Helsinki, the phenomenon has only recently been noticed and addressed with clear definitions of acceptable forms of short-term renting in order to protect residential housing rights.

The two cities have different experiences of tourism development: Venice has been long dependent on overtourism, and is currently questioning what her future, after the Covid-19 pandemic, will be. Helsinki has had modest but fast-growing flows of visitors and has maintained many different urban functions. This pandemic confirms, anyway, the volatility of the tourism market and unsustainability of any economic monoculture. Surely, the topic of short-term rentals and the role of platforms in them will be an interesting phenomenon to observe for the forthcoming months and years.

These two cases shed light on urban tourism in relation to the growing use of Internet-based applications. We have used a situated sustainability approach to present this topic through our own perspective as residents of tourist destinations—where platforms have taken over in the intermediation and provision of various services and produced already visible impacts.

Operating in virtual spaces, platforms produce mobility, economic, and social changes, as well as environmental and geographical impacts that may challenge local residents' living places and organizations. This chapter has taken a closer focus on platforms offering short-term rentals of rooms and apartments as a sector driving the strongest impacts on residential neighbourhoods.

Studying platform tourism is increasingly relevant for urban studies, social media studies, and tourism studies. From the perspective of urban studies, it elucidates the complexity and multiscalarity of sustainability issues, showing that what may initially have been marketed as socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable practices (e.g. sharing of underutilized living space) are actually producing unsustainable effects. As we have discussed, short-term rental platforms may accelerate the acquisition of housing as financial investments that cause the eviction of residents, coupled with other neighbourhood changes. In areas deeply involved in the tourism economy, homes become financial assets with high rentability. We argue that short-rental platforms are commodifying cultural and natural resources, creating new specialized economies, annihilating the social fabric of the locality, and infrastructuring and disciplining the space to extract value from it (Beaumont and Nicholls 2007). Since global platforms escape from local administrative regulations, multiple scales of governance and multi-actor networks (e.g. connecting mayors of tourist cities) need to be experimented in order to exchange practices addressing the new challenges.

Media studies are also fundamental for understanding patterns of tourist choices. The rise of digital platforms has been accompanied by the growing popularity of social media, which enable tourists to share their experiences to wide audiences and, thereby, to demonstrate taste and accumulate cultural capital (Dodds and Butler 2019: 14; Mowforth and Munt 2016: 124–46). This, in turn, encourages dynamic tourism consumption, as increasing numbers of tourists pursue the 'authentic' experiences popularized by social media influencers and other prominent individuals.

Moreover, the complexity of changes brought about by digital platforms in tourism highlights the importance of tourism studies

in understanding social issues in cities. By focusing on the relationship between tourists' motivations and behaviour, as well as the new opportunities offered by digital platforms, tourism researchers can contribute to the study of culture- and knowledge-based economies where cosmopolitan consumption is challenging the boundary between locals and tourists. Tourism studies must also consider the new modalities of entrepreneurialism and managerialism, as well as the new tourist professions brought about by the platforms.

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